

Bill Lavender, *While Sleeping* (Tuscon: Chax Press, 2004)

While Sleeping is a book comprised of three hundred and sixty short poems, though their brevity scarcely shortchanges the reader as the pieces ultimately function collectively as a well-wrought, continuous work. Poet Bill Lavender offers a book that in one sense appears as a year-long series of journal entries though proves to be a work cleverly constructed into something beyond a recording of the quotidian; perhaps a novel way of translating that which comprises our day-to-day existence. He does this repeatedly by commenting on as much as inquiring after the complexities of cognition and how it is that our conscious and unconscious are never quite as far from one another as we might expect. For example, he writes:

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what does it mean
to write while sleeping?
I'm a little fuzzy on it
myself had it
just a moment ago
& now it's gone.

In other pieces Lavender takes what may at first glance appear as a trite observation of some domestic detail, and somehow either punctuates it with an element of abstraction or states what seems to be ordinary in an unanticipated fashion. For example he writes:

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I look a long time
at the picture on the wall--
an excavation.

What is the excavation? Lavender has the ability in a few short lines to incite this type of inquiry. The reader may expect one thing and invariably encounter something of another kind. In this way, he is playing with clichés and simple nonsensical rhymes in what appears to be a careful manner; subtle shifts in spelling or spacing enable his poems to present what ordinarily would border on cliché in an unexpected way. However, the pivotal term here is subtle, as his slight orthographical changes as well as some of his spatial experiments are marked by their quiet suggestions. Far from blatant declarations requiring little or no

interpretation, his pieces not only require attention but once seen as a collective unit of fragments one begins to feel their power as an aggregate unit.

His 360 poems, in their varying lengths, shapes, tones and dictions, address the notion that language has a curious relationship with our consciousness. Very much aligned with the underpinnings of Lavender's previous book, *look the universe is dreaming*, *While Sleeping* is in a sense an investigation in verse; an investigation of the inevitably tenuous boundary between that which is awake and that which is fast asleep. Ultimately, he is a poet interested in lexical processing and in words and the ease with which they can become something else with the replacement of a letter, the insertion of a comma and an s, or a particular mark of punctuation.

His poems are consistently brief and one begins to sense the parallel being hinted at between the numbered fragments that comprise his book and the unnumbered fragments that comprise our cognition. Just as he offers a terse two lines then to begin more of the same, we form a thought fortunate to sustain it without interruption; the reality being that our minds are predisposed to constant shifting and movement. Lavender's poems when considered as a group are indicative of this seemingly ineluctable phenomenon.

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what just went by &
was so wonderful--
i just missed.

There is a sense that Bill Lavender is present, accompanying the reader as they go through the numbered poems; there is a sense of propinquity rather than a distant, superior voice. He speaks with a familiar yet inquisitive tone as if asking the reader to come have a seat in his living room as he goes about his business, excusing himself to manage the household, to feed his cat, to monitor the stove, or anything domestic in nature.

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there were never any facts
to begin with.

sometimes the cat
hides her face in her paws
as if weeping
or as if she doesn't want to see

Lavender's text is comprised of pieces that take on a variety of tones and structures; at once his verse has an aphoristic, diaristic, and dialectical quality to it. On one page he has the ability to offer up humor, details of the day's mundanity, as well as more serious and complex inquiry. It is precisely because of this that the text keeps driving forward in order to reach the final page with a sense of what Lavender is after, one aspect of which he describes in his preface:

The world is this nexus, dreamt of blame, linguistic reparation based on a weave of sleeps that stretch to adam (or whatever that variable may signify).

This quote offers a somewhat Jungian take on human experience yet also perhaps more importantly calls into question what it is that provides the subject of our poetry. Is our verse derived from the sober reality of our days or from the unconscious which seems less than real? This of course is a question that deserves serious consideration as many poets write of issues pertinent to their time and place; are uprisings and acts of terrorism anything less than real?

However even with this in mind, it seems as though a substantial segment of our cognition and its written extensions is really the manifestation of that which transpires as we sleep. Thus, being awake and in a lucid state of consciousness perhaps, Lavender suggests in his poetry is inextricable from the realm of slumber and dreams. So where then do our texts originate? When are we really writing?